Obscuring the Line between the Living and the Dead: Mortuary Activities inside the Grave Chambers of the Eastern Han Dynasty, China

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INTRODUCTION

Mortuary rituals of ancient societies have been of great interest to both historians and archaeologists. Though there exists no ancient text detailing the mortuary rituals carried out during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) in China, in recent years the archaeological excavation of graves dating to this period has revealed a complex treatment of the deceased, permitting scholars to glean an abundance of information on these practices and fueling further inquiry.

Yang (1932) contributed the first comprehensive study on Han mortuary rituals by piecing together descriptions of funerals recorded in different sources. Recently, Han mortuary studies have benefited from an increase in archaeological discoveries and many works on the topic have been published. Through his examination of funerary art in elite burial contexts, Wu (1988) suggested the focus of ritual activities shifted from the temple to the tomb during the Eastern Zhou (770–256 B.C.) and Han dynasties. In a similar vein, Poo (1990) made a comparison of lavish burial rituals between the pre-Han and Han periods. In a more comprehensive approach, Gao (2006) charted the evolution of mortuary rituals from the pre-Qin to Han periods by combining analyses of ancient texts with that of archaeological materials. Gao (2011) later analyzed the offering rituals recorded in a newly discovered text. Another exhaustive study on Han mortuary rituals contributed by Li (2003) describes all the rituals practiced in Han funerals, from death to the mourning activities after the funeral, and also introduces burial forms in different regions. Though beyond the scope of discussion in the current study, a number of works from a non-archaeological perspective also exist. These are centered on Han dynasty mortuary art and architecture or mortuary ethics (e.g., Li 1986; Thorp 1979; Xin 2000).

In his study of death rituals and social structure in ancient Greek and Roman societies, Morris (1992:179) remarks that literary sources usually focus on city-dwelling elites, but neglect rural populations. The history of ancient China suffers from the

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same predilection. The complex funeral rituals cited in historical texts and in more recent scholarly literature typically describe the mortuary practices of the upper classes. Both the shift in ritual focus suggested by Wu (1988) and the evolution of ritual practices presented by Gao (2006) only refer to the habits of the upper elites in Han society. The lavish Han period funerals analyzed by Poo (1990) were not possible for common people. Attention to the mortuary practices of Han commoners is long overdue given the scarcity of their mention in historical sources. Archaeological remains provide the primary, if not only, evidence of commoners' mortuary rituals during the Han dynasty.

This study was inspired by the excavation and observation of 274 Han commoner burials in the Xuecun 薛村 cemetery, Xingyang 荥阳 City, Henan Province. My analysis of grave structure at this site reveals new information about the mortuary practices of ancient people. The grave structure indicates that offering activities occurred beside the corpse inside the burial chamber. This idea was first put forward by archaeologists who excavated the Shaogou 烧沟 cemetery in Luoyang 洛阳 (Luoyang Team 1959:241), but it has not been mentioned in any ritual literature. Through analysis of grave structure, this article presents new evidence on this mortuary practice and further asserts that this hitherto unrecorded practice first emerged during the Xin dynasty (A.D. 9–23) and lasted into the Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25–220). Evidence of offering activities following the funeral also deserve attention. Motivating factors for these unusual practices may be related to social ethics of filial piety.

MAKING OFFERINGS INSIDE THE CHAMBER: EARLY STUDIES

During the 1953 excavation of the Shaogou cemetery in Luoyang, the capital city of the Eastern Han dynasty, several features of the Han graves attracted the attention of archaeologists. In the middle of the front chamber of burial No. 1026, a rectangular lacquer tray was placed on the floor. Four double-eared, oval drinking cups made of lacquer were laid out on the tray. Additionally, there were chicken bones next to the west end of the tray and unidentified animal bones to the east (Luoyang Team 1959:45–46). Several additional cups lay beside the tray and two others lay close to the head of the individual in the coffin on the western side of the tomb (Luoyang Team 1959:46). Similar features have been found in other tombs of the same or later period, but none were well preserved. Offering utensils (*dian qi* 奠器) and food remains reflect a scenario of offering food and drink inside the chamber by the living. The excavators therefore suggested that this set of utensils and remains signaled the initiation of a new ritual during the Xin dynasty—making offerings to the deceased inside the grave chamber (Luoyang Team 1959:241).

This was the first time archaeologists put forward the concept of making offerings inside a grave chamber, since the practice had not been described in contemporary (i.e., Han dynasty) ritual texts. Archaeologists only found clues regarding this practice in later documents, namely the Biography of Wang Xiang 王祥 in the *Jin Shu* 晋书 (History of the Jin Dynasty). In his final hours, a celebrity of the time named Wang Xiang told his descendants not to be extravagant in arranging his funeral. He said that "the space in front of the coffin should be limited to only a bed and a sitting couch; a plate of dry food, a plate of dry meat, and a cup of wine are enough for the offering in the morning and afternoon" (*Jin Shu* 2000, chap. 33:644). His words seem to indicate that making offerings to the dead inside the burial chamber at his time was

such a common practice that even a frugal funeral should not omit them. Wang Xiang lived during the Jin dynasty (A.D. 265–420), just several decades after the end of the Eastern Han. Although not clarified in the report (Luoyang Team 1959), the findings at Shaogou mark the first archaeological record of a new ritual practice, which was most likely inherited by the people of the Jin dynasty. Thorp (1979:159–160) also regards the ceremony inside the chamber as one of the ritual innovations of the middle-Han times.

Li (2003:59–65) indicates that there were three main forms of offering activities during the Han dynasty, each differentiated by the location where it was practiced: offerings made inside a temple erected near the tomb; offerings placed in front of the tomb; and offerings made inside the burial chamber. Making offerings inside the chamber is the only form not mentioned in ritual texts. However, in addition to burial No. 1026 at Shaogou, Li provides examples of three similar burials from other areas with offering utensils and food remains inside the chamber (Li 2003:64). Perhaps it is because of the lack of contemporary literary evidence that this special mortuary practice has received very little attention. Research on this custom is undoubtedly important and of great value in exploring the beliefs of Chinese people from about 2000 years ago.

During the excavation of a large Han cemetery from 2005 to 2008 in Xuecun, Xingyang City, Henan Province, the director of the project, Chu Xiaolong, and I noticed different forms of tomb passages among the 274 burials we uncovered. We published a study exclusively on these tomb passages, tentatively suggesting that some of the special forms of tomb passage supported the idea that offering activities occurred inside the tomb chamber (Zhou and Chu 2011). These special forms of tomb passages and their relation to the special mortuary practice are next discussed in the context of beliefs and social ethics.

Evidence for the Intention to Enter the Grave Chamber

The structural features of graves in ancient China vary in different periods. During the Han Dynasty, a new form of grave appeared featuring a rectangular vertical pit dug into the ground and a chamber cut into one end of the bottom. This gradually replaced the traditional shaft pit grave to become the dominant form in northern China (Takahama 1994; Wang 1982:175–176). This new burial form is termed *dong shi mu* 洞室墓 (cave-chamber grave) by Chinese archaeologists, because the chamber, which is dug on one narrow end of the vertical pit, looks like a cave with the opening located on the wall of the pit (Fig. 1). A similar grave structure is called a "catacomb" in English publications (von Falkenhausen 2004:127, 2006:204–243). The origin and spread of the catacomb in northern China is beyond the scope of this study, but is discussed exhaustively in other works (Takahama 1994; Thorp 1979:122–126).

Catacombs usually consist of a rectangular vertical pit with a depth of several meters from ground level and a chamber dug at one end of the bottom (Fig. 1). According to a previous study (Zhou and Chu 2011), ramps sometimes connect to the chambers of Han catacombs. The ramps come in two forms. One type is the single ramp or sloping passage, usually seen in high-status graves of the pre-Qin period. Throughout the Han period it is used by commoners, therefore no longer representing high status (Han 2000; Hu 1989; Luoyang Team 1959:79). The other form of ramp is characterized by

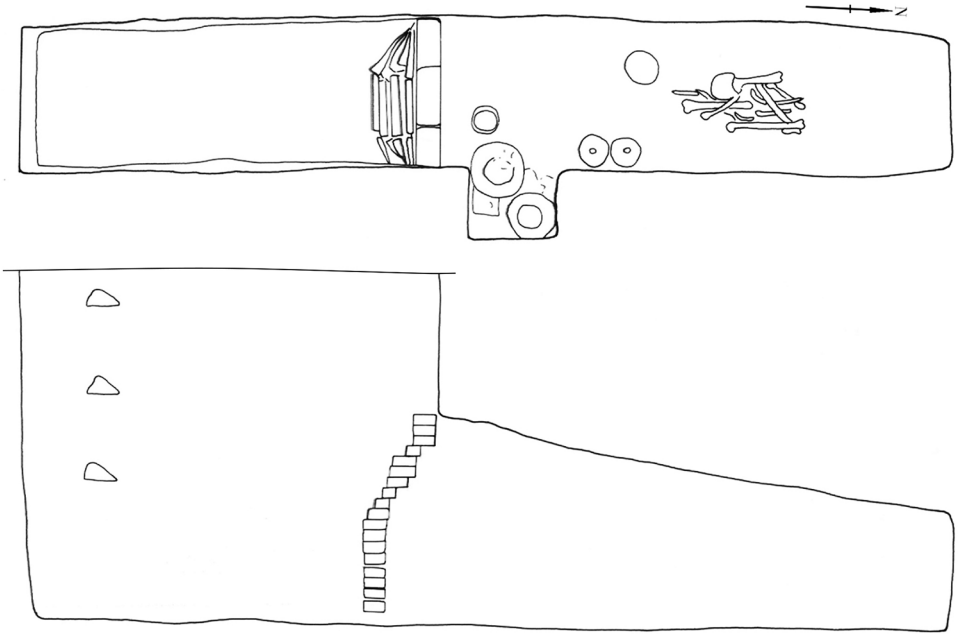

Fig. 1. Plan and profile views of typical Han catacomb, Tomb IV M45, Xuecun cemetery, Xingyang City, Henan Province.

the presence of an additional small narrow ramp with steps connected to a vertical pit. This step-ramp is connected to the other end of the vertical pit opposite the chamber, with steps descending from the ground level to the bottom of the pit (Figs. 2 and 3). Early field reports and research noted this form of ramp, but paid little attention to it (Luoyang Team 1959; Thorp 1979:176–177). In order to avoid confusion with the single sloping ramp attached to the chamber, I will use the term "combined ramp" to indicate a vertical pit combined with a step-ramp. Among the 225 burials of the Luoyang Shaogou cemetery, 17 are found with combined ramps. In the Xuecun cemetery in Xingyang, 59 out of the 274 graves have combined ramps (Zhou and Chu 2011).

Excavation of the Xuecun cemetery raised an interesting question. The majority of catacombs (182 out of 274) employed only one passageway in the form of a vertical pit with no ramp. This indicates that a vertical pit provided sufficient access for putting coffins and burial objects into the chamber. Given that they are only around 0.5 m wide, why were step-ramps added to vertical pits in 59 cases (Zhou and Chu 2011)? The coffins in this cemetery are all more than 0.6 m wide, as indicated by the undisturbed carbonized remains of wood, so the ramps were definitely unable to accommodate coffins.

As the Shaogou report mentions, such a small ramp can only allow one person to pass along it (Luoyang Team 1959:52). The excavators at first surmised that the small ramp was used by the laborers who dug the grave pit and settled the coffin into it. However, we noted that two rows of symmetrical footholds were always dug on opposing walls in the vertical pits (see profiles in Figures 1 and 2); these footholds were obviously used for climbing up and down, probably by the laborers. It is highly

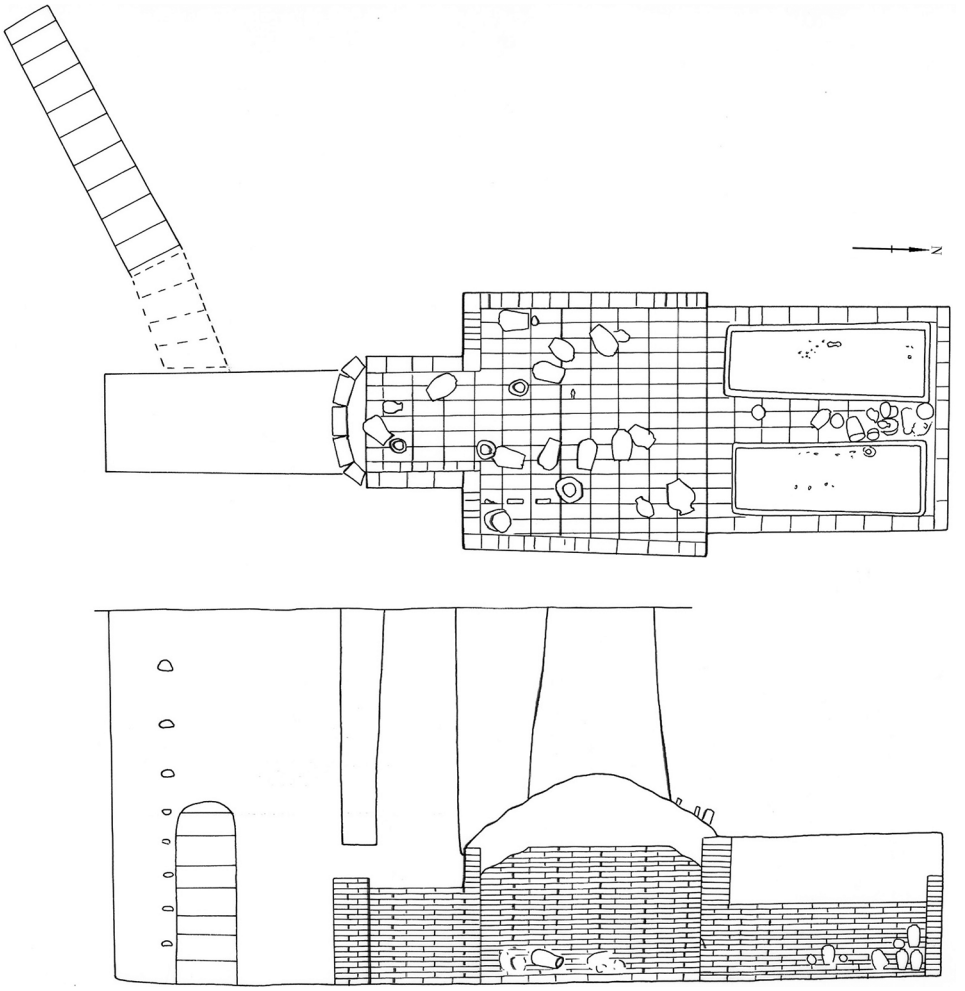

Fig. 2. Plan and profile views of a Han grave with combined ramp, Tomb I M21, Xuecun cemetery Xingyang City, Henan Province.

unlikely that extra effort would have been invested in digging a step-ramp just for the convenience of the grave builders when the footholds on the shaft wall served a similar purpose and required almost no extra cost. Another piece of evidence to argue against this assumption is that, as seen in Shaogou cemetery, a number of single vertical pits that are deeper than the ones combined with an exterior step-ramp were furnished only with footholds. This indicates that the step-ramp was not required for physical access to deep tombs.

Despite the many studies focusing on the chronology and typology of the Han catacomb (e.g., Han 2007; Takahama 1994), very few experts have paid attention to the meaning and function of the passages into the tombs, whether they were simple vertical pits or combined ramps. Han (2000), however, published a study on ramp passages in ancient China in which one of his three assumptions about the function of ramps was that they were built for the convenience of the spirits of the deceased

Fig. 3. Photograph of Han grave with a combined ramp (vertical pit on left, exterior step-ramp on right), Xuecun cemetery, Xingyang City, Henan Province. Photo courtesy of Chu Xiaolong.

to ascend to heaven. This purpose is difficult to support because it contradicts Han dynasty beliefs about the afterlife, which included four places where spirits dwelled in the afterlife, none of which were in the heavens: the Blessed Isles of the East; a magical realm in the west; the underground Yellow Springs; and a generalized fourth one related to the structure of beings that underlie the universe without describing a specific place for the dead (Loewe 1982:25–37). It is difficult to determine which belief was predominant, but different funerary texts such as the tomb-securing writs suggest that many Han people were convinced that the dead entered a subterranean world after death (Dien 1987; Ku 2003:99–104; Seidel 1987). With this in mind, the extra ramp could not convincingly have served the purpose of helping the dead to ascend to heaven.

The *he zang mu* 合葬墓 (multiple burial) was common in the Han dynasty, with some graves containing two or more individuals who died and were buried in the same tomb successively. It is possible that the step-ramp might have served to provide access to the tomb to bury people who died after the tomb was first sealed, if family members did not want to fully reopen the vertical pit to arrange the subsequent burial. However, as already mentioned, the width of the step-ramp would not have allowed a coffin to pass. In Xuecun, the ramp was also seen in a single burial (burial No. IM22). Therefore, it is unlikely that the ramp was built to facilitate later burials.

A more practical explanation seems plausible in this context. The step-ramp was most likely used by living people other than the tomb builders to enter and exit the tomb. Excluding the laborers who might have used the footholds in the vertical pit, mourners, including friends and relatives of the deceased, are among the most

reasonable possibilities. According to the textual records, only people with a criminal record were prohibited from attending funerals in the Han Dynasty for fear of offending the dead (Liu 2009; Yang 1932). All other people could be involved in the mourning and offering rituals and could have entered the chamber to make offerings and lament. While the small footholds on the walls of the vertical pit would have been easy for any strong adult to climb up and down, elderly or weak adults and small children would have found it difficult to enter the chamber—some of which were around ten meters in depth—this way. It might also have been considered inappropriate for mourners to climb the shaft wall under such solemn circumstances. Furthermore, climbing in and out while wearing mourning clothes would have been awkward. Considering all these difficulties, having a ramp with steps would have been more convenient for mourners.

As I observed during the excavations, the exterior ramps are always only wide enough for one person to pass through. The ramps lack a fixed length or orientation in the Xuecun cemetery. Some ramps are arranged on the same axis as the shaft, while others are connected at an angle to the main ramp (Zhou and Chu 2011) (Figs. 2 and 3). It is likely that these ramps were constructed mainly to facilitate participation in in-chamber rituals. There were no fixed rules for the orientation or length because they were built according to the requirements of different families.

The tombs in Shaogou cemetery are divided into six chronological phases. The combined ramp first appears in Phase 4, dated to the early period of the Eastern Han dynasty (A.D. 25–57), which succeeded the short-lived Xin dynasty (Luoyang Team 1959:231–239). The archaeologists who excavated the Shaogou cemetery suggested that the custom of making offerings inside the chamber started during the Xin dynasty, because that was when offering utensils first appeared inside the burial chambers (Luoyang Team 1959:241). A very important structural feature known as the dome-roof chamber appeared at the same time (Luoyang Team 1959:231–239). The dome-roof provided a larger space than the flat-roofed or curve-roofed chamber and enabled more activities to be conducted inside. When the combined ramp was found in Shaogou (following the initiation of in-chamber offerings) it was always in tombs with *qionglongding mushi* 穹窿顶墓室 (dome-roof chambers) that contained offering utensils. The combination of these structural features with offering utensils has also been found in other cemeteries on the central plains (Zhou and Chu 2011). Based on typological dating of associated pottery and coins, the combined ramp also appears in the early Eastern Han dynasty in Xuecun (Zhou 2008).

This form of combined ramp began to be built right after the appearance of in-chamber offerings during the Xin dynasty. Indeed, the majority of graves with this feature are also characterized by having offering utensils buried inside. The combined ramp structure seems to reflect people's intentions to enter the tomb. The chronological sequence of their appearances and the co-existence of these features indicate that this new form of ramp was related to the new trend in mortuary rituals, namely making offerings inside the chamber.

Food remains and related offering utensils inside grave chambers in the Xin dynasty suggest that in-chamber offering activities started during this time period. Tombs with evidence of such practices were built with only deep vertical pits at that time. We can speculate that, at the beginning, entering the tomb through the vertical pit to make offerings was difficult and inconvenient. The new phenomenon of building combined ramps in the early Eastern Han dynasty may reflect that people tried to

improve upon and facilitate the new in-chamber mortuary ritual by building an exterior step-ramp beside the vertical pit. Since the combined ramp existed throughout the Eastern Han in the Luoyang area at both Shaogou and Xuecun, the new ritual of in-chamber offerings may have become prevalent after the Xin dynasty, at least in the areas around the Eastern Han capital city.

Reentering the Chamber after the Funeral: Unusual Cases

Structural features of the tomb such as the combined ramp confirm that mourners made an effort to enter the chamber. Whether the ramps were only used during the funerals or were used again to enter the tombs at later moments is difficult to discern. However, rare evidence of reentry into a burial chamber after the funeral does exist in the literature. For example, the Biography of Chen Fan 陈蕃 in the *Hou Han Shu* 后汉书 (History of Eastern Han) describes a man named Zhao Xuan 赵宣 who did not close the passageway to his parents' tomb after the funeral, but instead lived inside the passage (i.e., ramp) and mourned them for over 20 years (*Hou Han Shu* [1965], chap. 66 : 2159–2160). The man was known to the local governor, Chen Fan, for his exceptional filial piety. It is impossible to verify whether Zhao Xuan actually lived inside the ramp for over 20 years, but the text suggests that he was seen to have reentered an unclosed tomb after the funeral had taken place. Living inside the ramp of the tomb to show grief was a way of attracting public attention, although the usual way of displaying filial piety was to erect a hut beside the grave and live inside it for a set mourning period (Yang 1932). This evidence implies that reentering the tomb to mourn and make offerings after the funeral was over could have happened, but only as a special case, since this is the only text that refers to such a practice.

It is impossible to verify Zhao's case because his parents' tomb is unknown, but archaeological findings in the Xuecun cemetery may support the existence of such unusual mortuary activities. Among the 59 graves with combined ramps in Xuecun, all but two take the form of one step-ramp connecting to one vertical pit. The two exceptions, burial No. IM18 (burial No. 18 in district I) and No. IIM76 (burial No. 76 in district II), were both built with one vertical pit and two ramps, with the first ramp connecting to one end of the pit and the second connecting directly to the front chamber. For example, the brick wall at the northeast corner of the front chamber of burial IIM76 was broken by the second step-ramp (Fig. 4). This confirms that the second ramp was constructed after the tomb was completed. The unusual location of this ramp makes it looks like a tunnel for tomb looters, but the carefully cut steps at the bottom exclude this possibility, since looters would be in too much haste to enter the tomb to waste time on such work. The width of the second ramp excludes the possibility of it having been used to put coffins of people who died later into the tomb, even though both these two cases represent multiple burials with more than two individuals buried inside of each. Current evidence supports the interpretation that the second ramp was used by mourners to reenter the chamber after the funeral, during which the vertical pit and first ramp were filled with soil.

Whether mourners lived inside the tomb, as Zhao Xuan is reputed to have done, or just entered to make offerings some time after the funeral was over remains unclear. It is clear, however, that in both cases in Xuecun people broke the seal on the tomb after the funeral and reentered the chamber to spend time in proximity to the deceased. This unusual behavior seems to contradict some aspects of popular belief.

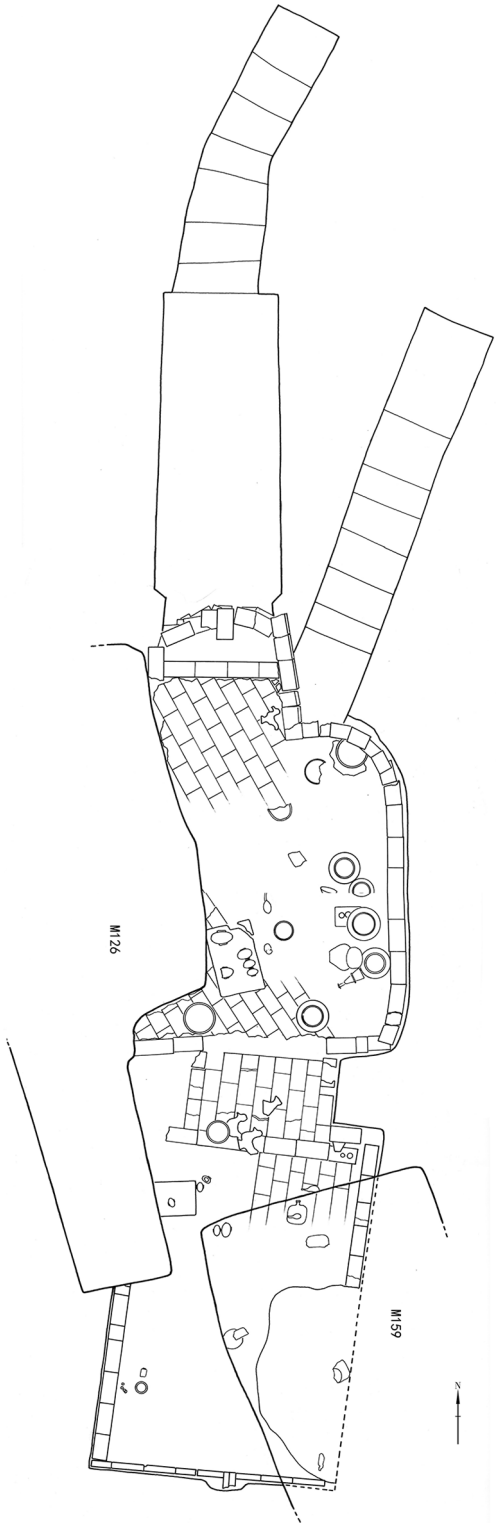

Fig. 4. Burial No. II M76 with two exterior step-ramps, Xuecun cemetery, Xingyang City, Henan Province. (The western portion of the front chamber and southeast corner of the back chamber were cut across by later graves M126 and M159.)

CONTRADICTION BETWEEN RITUAL AND POPULAR BELIEF

Literary descriptions of complex mortuary rituals reflect not only the reverence, lamentation, and blessings given to the dead by their survivors, but also their fear of the spirits of the dead. The living exerted great effort to protect themselves from any possible influence by the dead. Frazer (1886) believed that such fear of the dead was the motivation for all mortuary rituals, which were essentially attempts to control ghosts. There is a general consensus that ancient Chinese people believed ghosts were the spirits of dead people (Poo 2004). The relationship between humans and ghosts in ancient China is multifaceted (Poo 2004), but during Han times it was mainly confrontational and ghosts were always feared by living people. Helpful and benevolent ghosts do not appear in written records until the Six Dynasties (A.D. 222–589) period (Poo 2004:183). In his study of Qin (221–207 B.C.) and Han taboos, Liu (2009) points out that funeral rituals are meant to separate the living from the dead and keep the latter from disturbing living people. Both ancient Chinese documents and archaeological remains provide evidence supporting this contention. Texts excavated from Han tombs clearly express the belief that "the dead are terrifying revenants who inflict disease and misfortune. . . . They have to be securely locked away" (Seidel 1987:229). For example, the sixth century A.D. Chinese scholar, Yan Zhitui 顏之推, listed several customs aimed at getting rid of troublesome spirits (Yan 2007:69). Although he regarded these customs as unorthodox and inhumane, his text reveals the existence of different rituals of exorcism driven by fear of the dead.

Nickerson (2006) analyzes this fear of the dead and attempts to protect the living from them in ancient China, including mortuary rituals, exorcisms conducted by shamans, and the inclusion of different forms of grave goods in tombs. Von Falkenhausen (2004) believes that surrogate objects (*ming qi* 明器) such as pottery models of granaries, animals, or ox-drawn chariots were put in tombs to separate the dead from their survivors. He further suggests that tomb furnishings that imitated living quarters were intended to fulfill the needs of the dead, ensuring that they would remain content in the afterlife and not return to haunt the living (von Falkenhausen 2004). The phrase "*shengsi yilu*" (生死异路 [let living and dead take separate paths]) so frequently appears in the *zhenmu wen* 镇墓文 (grave-securing writs) of the Eastern Han dynasty that Nickerson (2006) used it in the title of his article. It demonstrates the survivors' desire to be separated from the deceased.

The practice of building dual funerary structures—temple and tomb—with the temple as focus of mourning rituals, ended during the Han dynasty. Previously, ancestral temples were usually built close to residences inside cities or villages, but after mourning rituals shifted from the temple to the tomb, the once silent graveyards became places for social activities (Wu 1988). The tomb became an independent center for ritual ancestor worship during the middle of the first century A.D. (Wu 1988). Instead of facilitating contact between the living and dead, as was the function of temple worship, the tomb became a structure that permanently separated them (Nickerson 2006; von Falkenhausen 1994). The tomb served to demarcate the living from the dead and became a place to be feared and left undisturbed for the benefit of both parties.

Given this context, reentering a tomb after a funeral was over would seem to contradict popular beliefs about the dead and ghosts. People built tombs and placed grave goods inside to fulfill the needs of their deceased ancestors in hopes of

making sure they peacefully stayed away from the living. If a tomb was left open (as in Zhao Xuan's case) or reopened after having been sealed (as seems to be the case for two of the Xuecun burials), it would have disturbed the spirits or ghosts of the dead. That people engaged in such unusual activities despite their fear requires further examination.

A Reason for Crossing the Line

None of the accounts of funerary activities held above ground mention direct contact with the deceased buried underground after the funeral was over. Even if building an extra ramp (i.e., in addition to the vertical pit) to use to enter the chamber during the funeral was not unusual (at least in Shaogou and Xuecun), digging a second ramp directly connected to the chamber to facilitate in-chamber offering activities after the funeral seems an excessive elaboration of the mortuary ritual. Considering the widely acknowledged fear of the dead, such an action crosses the line separating the worlds of the living and the dead. It contradicts all the activities listed by Nickerson (2006) that were intended to protect survivors from the spirits of the dead. I suggest that these special mortuary practices may be explained by the social ethics of the Han dynasty.

It is widely known that Han dynasty people placed a high value on filial piety, a concept derived from Confucianism (Zhao 1992). The Han government took steps to encourage displays of filial piety. For example, one of the two main ways government officials were selected to serve the state was according to their reputation for filial obedience and honesty, called *ju xiao lian* (举孝廉 [recommending people of filial piety and incorruptibility]) (Huang 1985; Powers 1981). Having a member of the family serving in the government could raise the social and economic standing of an entire clan (Powers 1981). Influenced by social ethics, government encouragement, and the possibility of improving clan status, people tried their utmost to show reverence and grief for their deceased parents. Funerals during this time became as extravagant as possible (Hao 2007; Zhang 1995). Some people remained in mourning for very long periods (Yang 1932) and others built monuments to express their piety (Powers 1981). In extreme cases, people such as Zhao Xuan apparently resided in their parents' tomb for a long time.

As mentioned above, Zhao Xuan's reputation for filial piety, expressed by the 20-year-long mourning period spent inside his parents' tomb, was known to a local governor, Chen Fan. Chen intended to recommend Zhao for a position in the government until he found out that Zhao had sired five children during the mourning period. Since mourners were supposed to remain abstinent during the mourning period, this represented an unforgivable offense to the dead (*Hou Han Shu*, chap. 66:2159–2160). Although his path to government service failed, Zhao did successfully attract the attention of the public because of his unusual way of showing filial piety.

This case demonstrates that the social ethics of the Han dynasty could drive mortuary rituals into extreme or unusual forms. It was the very unsuitability and strangeness of living inside a tomb that probably drew official notice to Zhao Xuan and resulted in his activity being recorded in official documents. The fear of the dead was deeply rooted in the minds of the people, so those who dared to overcome this fear and cross the line for the sake of displaying filial piety would have stood out and been highly regarded by society.

As discussed above, archaeological evidence suggests that using one exterior ramp to enter the chamber, probably during the funeral, was not unusual. It reflected a new trend in burial rituals following the Xin dynasty and was probably also related to displays of filial piety. In the rare cases where the chamber was reentered after the funeral was concluded, probably to make repeated offerings to the deceased in further demonstrations of filial piety, people must have dismissed their beliefs that the spirits of the dead would be disturbed by such intrusions. Fear of the dead was ignored and the line between the two worlds was not as strictly observed as was normal; indeed, it was even crossed.

CONCLUSION

Textual sources seldom focus on the burial rituals of commoners, so the most reliable way to explore the question of whether Han dynasty mourners entered tombs after funerals were concluded is through archaeological work. Not only do grave objects reflect mortuary practices, but the structure of the burials themselves record important information. The emergence of in-chamber offering activities during the Xin dynasty is only revealed archaeologically. The appearance of the combined ramp, featuring a vertical pit passage in conjunction with an extra small ramp in early Eastern Han further demonstrates the prevalence of this new ritual form following the Xin dynasty, as well as people's efforts to improve upon it.

Most individuals buried in the Shaogou and Xuecun cemeteries were commoners. Some local elites may have been included, but all belonged to a group ignored in ancient literature. This study demonstrates that their mortuary rituals can be revealed by the inclusion of funerary objects in tombs and the burial structures themselves. The social ethic of highly valuing filial piety during the Han dynasty greatly affected the mortuary practices of the time. In order to display their deep love and sincere grief for their deceased parents, people began to make offerings inside grave chambers, and facilitated access to the chambers by improving the structures of the tomb passages. Some people apparently reentered the chambers after the funerals took place and the tomb was sealed, to make offerings and mourn the deceased. The second ramp to the chamber was built for this purpose. Although this is only seen in rare cases, it is an indication that normative mortuary practices could be shaped by social ethics into unusual forms. The construction of secondary ramps suggests that the line between the living and dead was obscured and fear of the dead was overcome.

The exterior ramp beside the shaft pit is currently seen only in the Shaogou and Xuecun cemeteries, both of which are located very close to the Eastern Han capital city Luoyang. Cases of burials with exterior ramps have either not been found or have not been reported for other areas of the central plains. A similar form found in the Xi'an 西安 area displays different features (Zhou and Chu 2011), so it is not included in this discussion, since it may reflect strictly local burial customs. Future discoveries may reveal more regional variations and clarify the spread of this new trend in mortuary rituals stemming from the Xin dynasty.

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ABSTRACT

The complex mortuary rituals practiced during the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220) in China are well documented in textual records dating to the period. However, these records, as well as more recent archaeological investigations, focus solely on mortuary treatment of the elite, completely overlooking the burial rites practiced by commoners in the same period. Based on my excavation of a group of Han dynasty commoner graves, I describe the mortuary treatment afforded to commoners in this period. I contend that a key structural feature, an exterior ramp constructed beside the vertical pit of some Han tombs that appeared in the early Eastern Han period, reflects people's intention to enter the chamber and make offerings to the dead. There are also rare cases of reentering the chamber to make offerings after the funeral. This is supported by a secondary ramp built after the graves had been sealed. Considering the widely referenced fear of ghosts, reentering the tomb to make offerings after the funeral seems to obscure the line between the living and dead and was unusual. I argue that the emergence of such activity is a display of filial piety, a practice highly valued in Han society. The current study demonstrates that burial structures can reveal important aspects of burial rituals and provide new information about the funeral practices of common people in the Eastern Han dynasty. Keywords: mortuary rituals, Eastern Han dynasty, filial piety, China, burials.